

Green building is catching on in S.A.

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When Alison Rivenburgh moved to San Antonio in 2001, part of her felt like it was still the 1980s.

"It's like 20 years behind everyone else," she said of the city. "It just started to pick up in the last couple of years. Part of it is the rest of the country noticing our real estate market."

Rivenburgh is talking about green — environmentally friendly — building. And it's her business to know what she's talking about.

She's a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design-certified green consultant. She started her own company, Sustainable Perspectives, in May to help San Antonio catch up with other large cities in its green building. She previously held a similar position with Contexts Consultants and Architects in San Antonio.

The LEED certification program was developed by the U.S. Green Building Council to recognize new or remodeled buildings and homes that meet certain environmental requirements.

Her one-woman business is finding plenty of takers in town.

"It's just me right now," she said. "I wasn't sure how well I'd do, but it's just been amazing."

Some of her confidence stems from the city beginning to be interested in the movement. It passed a resolution in April that all new city buildings must meet the criteria for a Silver LEED rating.

"It really was kind of a sign the market was there and someone could make a living doing it," Rivenburgh said.

Another booster was her work with Build San Antonio Green, a program dedicated to creating awareness and interest among builders and homeowners in resource-efficient building methods, materials and technologies.

"It's good to have somebody who's like a second set of eyes," said Stephen Colley, a building coordinator with Build San Antonio Green. "It's also been helpful to get her input on new programs and how they should look."

Colley said LEED consultants can help take the national requirements and adapt them for San Antonio and its environment.

Rivenburgh has helped Build San Antonio Green step up its certification program. In January, it will launch a second level for new home building and will also launch a remodeling certification campaign.

Since she started her company, most of Rivenburgh's work has been with commercial buildings.

She just finished consulting with the Pearl Brewery to make the existing full goods building Silver LEED-certified. The building, near the one with the beer can, will have office, residential and retail space with solar panels and beer vats recycled into rainwater collection cisterns among its green features.

She has also met with Trinity University, which has begun renovating some of its buildings and residence halls to earn LEED ratings.

"As an educational institution, we have a unique opportunity to learn more about these issues and play a role in that," said John Greene, director of the physical plant at Trinity. "It's been a learning curve for us, so she's holding our hands through the whole process."

Greene said he picked Rivenburgh because of her degree from Atlanta's Emory University, which is considered at the forefront of green education.

Rivenburgh is consulting with Silver Oak Medical Center, which will break ground in 2008 on Hardy Oak in Stone Oak. The building has been submitted for Silver LEED certification. Once complete, it will save 535,000 gallons of water per year through rainwater collection, will have a white roof that reflects rather than absorbs heat, and will have longer-lasting heating and air conditioning equipment.

Rivenburgh hopes her work will be able to dispel the myth that green building costs more.

"Everybody has that idea ... but that's not necessarily true," Rivenburgh said.

In fact, with many of the bigger companies and home builders she consults, she promotes saving money as much as saving energy.

Certain roofing can cost less, as can advanced framing that uses less wood. She also promotes tree conservation and leaving surrounding areas natural to provide more shade and to cut down on irrigation and landscaping costs.

"We're starting to reach that market of the mass builders, which is important because they have a huge impact," Rivenburgh said.

"San Antonio still has a lot of room to grow," she said. "An organization hadn't stepped up until now, and that's really important."